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The Feminist Art of Self-Education

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Abstract

Sociologist Elizabeth Long has charted the emergence of women's reading groups in nineteenth-century America. 'The women who founded literary clubs', Long (2004, 337) tells us, 'were aflame with the then revolutionary desire for education and self-development, which they called "self-culture".' Comparable aspirations continued to fuel a drive amongst women to organise together within reading and publishing groups, usually outside of official institutions, well into the twentieth century. This 'revolutionary desire' for self-education has also been evident in the UK women's art and art history movement, although it has not been addressed in thorough detail. This article therefore seeks to situate an overlooked history of artistic reading and publishing communities in relation to an established body of theory in literary and cultural studies. These theoretical materials will illuminate the importance that reading and self-education (either in person or as part of a periodical network) had in establishing solidarity, and generating debate, within a flourishing art and art history movement.

The second half of this article focuses on a specific case study. *FAN: Feminist Art News* (1980-93) was an independent, grassroots publication that grew out of the Women Artists' Newsletter in London. Temporary editorial collectives published themed issues on a quarterly basis. This article contends that it is no coincidence the subject of art education formed the focus of the periodical's first issue, as well as a subsequent issue four years later. This indicates the significance of a reflexive auto-didacticism to second-wave feminism, as well as gesturing towards the long history of 'education and self-improvement' that has fuelled women's reading and study groups since the nineteenth century.

Illustrations

Figure 1: Cover of *FAN: Feminist Arts News*, Vol.1 No.1 (1980). All illustrations have been scanned from copies of *FAN* held at the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths, University of London. Please do get in touch if you have any information relating to these images or the rights holder.

Figure 2: Cover of *FAN: Feminist Arts News*, Vol.1 No.10 (1984).

Figure 3: Internal page of *FAN: Feminist Arts News*, Vol.1 No. 1 (1980).

Figure 4: Internal page of *FAN: Feminist Arts News*, Vol.1 No.10 (1984).

Figure 5: Internal page of *FAN: Feminist Arts News*, Vol.1 No. 1 (1980).

Figure 6: Internal page spread, *FAN: Feminist Arts News*, Vol.1 No. 1 (1980).

Figure 7: Loose-leaf poster insert, *FAN: Feminist Arts News*, Vol.1 No. 1 (1980).

The Feminist Art of Self-Education

The feminist art, history and theory movement that exploded into existence in the UK during the latter half of the twentieth century would have been unthinkable without the profusion of reading groups and publishing collectives that enfolded and fuelled that cauldron of intellectual experimentation. Little attention has, however, been devoted to researching and understanding the importance of that study culture in the production, mediation and dissemination of feminist perspectives on art. This is partly attributable to the self-directed and independent nature of such groups, which tended to meet outside of formal institutions, often in the home, and which therefore present a slippery subject for historians. It can be challenging to chart ‘the actual reading habits and experiences of those whose access to print has not necessarily been shaped by dominant institutions, or whose responses have been formed through ethnic, as well as gendered resistance to their norms.’ (Flint 2006: 529) This historiographical omission is also a result of art history’s conventional attachment to the art object, above and beyond a reflexive consideration of the systems that constitute that field of knowledge; a convention that feminism has unfailingly challenged. To date, the heterogeneous reading practices of women have been more seriously addressed in the fields of literature and book history, which are logically attentive to subjects’ encounters with text and print culture. In recent years scholars have investigated the role of periodicals within first- and second-wave activism (Bazin and Waters 2016), the history of women’s book groups (Long 2014), feminist publishing as activism (Murray 2004; Harker and Farr 2016), and the feminist bookshop network in Britain (Delap 2016).

Drawing on those more advanced studies in sociology and literary history, the aim of this article is to describe and account for the pedagogic-publishing landscape within which feminist approaches to art and art history first emerged in Britain. It pulls together recollections from leading figures in the women’s art movement and connects these accounts with the legacy of women’s study and self-education since the nineteenth century. In so doing the article sketches a preliminary framework for comprehending how para-institutional practices associated with libraries, bookshops, reading groups, and publishing collectives empowered women as readers and producers of art, history and theory. (This sketch is also intended to form a foundation for understanding and connecting the collection of essays in this special issue.) The second-half of the article focuses on one example from this pedagogic-publishing landscape, providing a contextualised account of the British magazine, *FAN: Feminist Arts News*.

Reading Together, Learning Together

Revisiting accounts of feminist gatherings the 1960s and 1970s can be an energising experience. Writers often invoke an atmosphere of intellectual excitement; they reminisce about ad-hoc experiments in communal living, piles of inky photocopied materials passed among friends, and recall the generative miscellany of critical theory and domestic reflection that powered a change in generational consciousness. It can admittedly be tempting to

romanticise this moment in feminist history, to offer a nostalgic celebration of analogue reading as wholly distinct from our networked digital age. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that something specific characterised women's collective self-education during this period. Women had founded literary clubs in the nineteenth century, 'afire with the then revolutionary desire for education and self-development, which they called "self-culture".' (Long 2004: 337) By the 1970s, however, it seems obvious that this energetic reading-and-study-culture began to power enduring transformations to disciplinary knowledge as women increasingly interacted with, and took up positions of power within, mainstream academic institutions. For artists and art historians this auto-didactic culture was especially necessary as, confronted with an art history that almost entirely effaced the contribution of women as creative producers, they explored new ways of making and thinking about visual art.

The feminist reshaping of art's visual and historical codes found correspondence with their hijacking of print media. As the media historian Laurel Forster (2016: 812) has suggested, 'at the WLM's resurgence of feminist consciousness and intent in Britain in the late 1960s and 1970s, control over the printed word, and its production, was seized upon as a potential portal to power.' An alternative pamphleteering and publishing network proliferated, founded in the belief that feminist expression, education and communication could transform society. It is widely agreed by theorists that periodicals do not simply record or mirror political movements but, in the accretion of reader-writer networks, function to actively produce them. For instance, as Natalie Thomlinson (2016: 433) writes of 1980s black feminist groups, 'periodicals gave abstract movements material form; in some sense, they *made* movements by providing a focal point for debate and allowed for movements to be understood as coherent identities.' Consequently, reading and learning together – either in person or as part of a wider periodical network – came to be understood by feminists as a revolutionary activity connected to an activist understanding of the world and the individual's gendered place within it.

The significance of these activities has not been overlooked by feminist art historians and artists. In a published lecture of 1994, for instance, Linda Nochlin offers an account of her time studying and later teaching at Vassar College in the late 1960s. Nochlin (1994: 23) recalls her Damascene awakening of feminist consciousness, a transformative night of 'reading until 2am, making discovery after discovery, cartoonish lightbulbs going off in my head at a frantic pace.' An acquaintance had given her a 'heap of roughly printed, crudely illustrated journals' along with a brusque instruction to read them:

The pile included, I remember, *Redstockings Newsletter*, *Off Our Backs*, *Every woman*, and many other publications, including special editions of radical news sheets run by men which angry women had taken over for the explicit purpose of examining the conditions of their exploitation. I started reading and I couldn't stop...

This exhilarating educational experience was, significantly, stimulated by non-commercial, grassroots publications and the proselytising friend who shared them. The experience compelled Nochlin to radically restructure her teaching and, a few weeks later, she began delivering one of the earliest university courses on women and art whilst investigating available

historical and theoretical resources. Similar developments shortly started taking place in the UK, where Griselda Pollock (1996: 1) remembers,

Such knowledge as British feminists acquired in the early 1970s was procured by our forming reading groups and collectives, established in the radical tradition of workers' self-help groups and feminist consciousness-raising. We formed reading groups to study Marx, Lacan, and Foucault. We went to conferences organised by film societies in order to come to terms with psychoanalysis. We read magazines like *Screen*, *New Left Review*, and *Red Rag*.

The reading materials are distinct from those of Nochlin (with a focus on Marxist and psychoanalytic, rather than radical, feminism) and the context more definitively extra-institutional, but the importance of periodicals and collaborative self-education remains foregrounded. It was within this informal learning context that the Women's Art History Collective was formed in 1973 and, although the group met (and taught) regularly only for a few years, as Hilary Robinson (2017) points out, it 'went on to develop and publish feminist thinking about art that was enormously influential, shaping the way the field developed in the UK and beyond.' One of the 'enormously influential' outcomes of this research group was Rozsika Parker and Pollock's co-authored book, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, of 1981. The Acknowledgments proudly declare, '[t]his book is the product of the Women's Liberation Movement', and its authors directly thank the Women's Art History Collective, as well as the editorial collective of *Spare Rib* magazine, where Parker published pioneering art criticism. These paratextual details reveal glimpses of the fertile study environment from which the authors' pioneering, politicised research was able to take shape. Indeed, Pollock (Kelly et al. 2015: np) has consistently drawn attention to this feminist culture of learning, more recently reminding her readers: 'I cannot stress enough the importance of reading groups, weekend schools, a whole apparatus of unofficial but absolutely brilliant studying together and transmission of new ways of seeing the world and reading cultural practices.'

The fabled History Group had formed in 1969 as the 'first study/reading group' of the London's Women's Liberation Workshop (Kelly et al. 2015: np). In a recent conversation, members recalled attending a number of coexistent study clusters, including *Capital* reading groups and the Lacanian Psychanalyse et Politique in Paris. This indicates a rich calendar of events, an evanescent fusion of feminism, Marxism and psychoanalysis coalescing to produce that 'apparatus' of unofficial learning. Of course second-wave feminism was not divorced from concomitant activities taking place across university campuses, and its attitudes materialised within a nexus of 1960s counterculture, underground publishing and experiments in education. The pedagogic terrain was marked by actions including the student protests and college sit-ins of 1968, and de-institutionalising gestures such as London's Anti-University; while the influential theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Paulo Freire began appearing in English translation in the early 1970s, providing critical perspectives on education's emancipatory promise and underlining its structurally reproductive function in capitalist society. This was, at the same time, a period of rapid expansion in formal education and countless women availed of these

new opportunities. Consequently, feminist educational ideas and practices straddled a reformist liberal conviction and the revolutionary critique of those ideas.

The activist Beatrix Campbell has described the Women's Liberation Movement's 'extraordinary relationship to the written word... you just read everything, and it impacted massively on your life.' (Delap 2016: 171) Reading informally, beyond disciplinary curricular, for feminism the personal, meaningful and subjective has always played an important role alongside scholarly, public and institutionally recognised knowledge. As these reminiscences remind us, women read widely, across disciplines and applied those lessons to analysing the intellectual bases of accepted knowledge. Rosalind Delmar (Kelly et al. 2015: np) recalls the History Group's 'mix of intellectual work and activism... we were as likely to read and discuss Levi-Strauss and Engels as the "Redstockings Manifesto" – and we also debated bread and butter questions like "who does the housework and why?".' It is hard from our current vantage point to appreciate the power of this radical gesture, but this stimulating mix of high theory and vernacular reflection was vital to the educational milieu of the period.

Members of the History Group included prominent artists-theorists Mary Kelly and Laura Mulvey, both of whom have asserted that participation in the History Group 'changed my life'.¹ (Kelly et al. 2015: np) According to sociologist Elizabeth Long such powerful sentiments have been typical of women's book groups since their emergence in the nineteenth century. 'The emotional closeness that such groups can foster, and the concomitant sense of solidarity, has also been a constant over time.' (Long 2004: 346) These intellectual and emotional attractions consequently appear to be endemic to the custom and practice of women's reading groups; traversing temporal and geographical boundaries, as well as encompassing fictional, political or theoretical reading materials. To the extent that these lures appear transhistorical and transcultural, they are presumably limited by another transhistorical category, that of male dominance or modern patriarchy. Reading collectively as women can, under these conditions, become an act of self-determination and education; it adds a pronounced element of sociality to what is – in the modern era – normally a solipsistic, individual act.² There is a powerful affective quality to reading and writing together under conditions of marginalisation and, to borrow Barbara Green's (2016: 362) description of suffrage networks, these groups tend to be 'saturated with political feelings'.

In the words of Liz Stanley and Sue Wise: 'Feminism appeals because it means something – it touches deeply felt needs, feelings and emotions. It makes direct, emotional and personal appeal, or it means little except as an intellectual exercise.' (Waters 2016: 449) For feminist artists and art historians working in the 1970s, knowledge and learning was indelibly linked to activism; reshaping disciplinary knowledge was one part of changing the world, and intellectual revolution was meaningful in so far that it was linked to social revolution. In an emotive video from the 1970s, the artist and educator Judy Chicago insists upon the

¹ As a counterpoint to this, Juliet Mitchell admits that the Group was 'not so significant', evidencing how different individuals' experience of an event can be. See Tate 2015.

² The History Group also published an issue of the Women's Liberation magazine *Shrew* in 1970, thus publicising and disseminating its discussions with a broader WLM audience.

effectiveness of study and consciousness-raising groups, and expounds the need to read theory. She celebrates intellectual curiosity and declares: ‘Those of us who are effectively making change are not ignorant. Those people who have ever made change in the history of the human race were not ignorant, and nobody who is ignorant will ever make change.’ (Hershman 2010: 29min 37secs) In the short clip Chicago appears exasperated but impassioned, punching her hands in the air, speaking quickly and loudly, emphatically vocalising and embodying the function of reading and learning as intellectual weapons in political struggle.

FAN: Feminist Arts News

The 1960s to 1980s saw a surge of energy invested in self-published feminist magazines and newsletters. Women had long experienced a fraught relationship to commercial print media and its contradictory representations of the feminine ideal; an experience that Gayle Tuchman in 1978 termed, ‘the symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media’. A fervent outpouring of ideas and information flowed through an informal communication system comprised of independent bookshops, slide libraries, reading groups, publishers, periodical collectives and newsletter-writers; nodes in a feminist network sustained by consciousness-raising, pamphleteering and auto-didacticism. ‘The processes of collectively producing, writing and publishing was’, as Laurel Forster (2016: 820) describes it, ‘a feminist commitment, and as much activism as other forms of consciousness-raising.’ Much has been written about the dynamic publishing landscape of second-wave feminism. Its clusters of reader-viewers³ have frequently been framed as ‘imagined communities’, in Benedict Anderson’s (1983) famous phrasing, or ‘subaltern counterpublics’ in Nancy Fraser’s (1990) equally well-known expression, with research concentrated on the often riven collectivism of the movement. What follows here will examine one example of a feminist art magazine and, in particular, trace how the periodical’s content, creation and circulation point to a self-reflexive educational drive within the women’s art, history and theory movement.

FAN: Feminist Arts News (hereafter *FAN*), was a UK-based, non-commercial magazine published quarterly, although unevenly, between 1980 and 1993. It contributed to an alternative and mainstream publishing landscape marked by a paucity of writing on women’s art and the political, systemic and formal issues related to its production. Throughout the seventies and eighties, mainstream magazines increasingly devoted the odd special issue to women’s art, but few dedicated periodicals existed (Parker and Pollock 1987: 14-15). The American women’s art movement produced *Chrysalis* (1977-80) on the West Coast, and *The Feminist Art Journal* (1972-77) as well as the more polished *Heresies* (1977-93) on the East Coast; while in the UK writing about women’s art was sometimes available in *Spare Rib* (1972-1993) and historical research could be found in the academic journal *Art History* (1978-).⁴ The Women Artists Slide Library distributed a newsletter from 1979 and a journal from 1983, which the editors of *FAN* referred to as a ‘sister publication’, adding that: ‘We are the *only* two magazines representing

³ Here I’m borrowing David Abrahamson’s term ‘reader-viewers’ (2015), a useful phrase that takes on additional valences when considering an art magazine.

⁴ For more on feminist writing in *Art History*, see Horne (2018).

the community of women artists and designers in this country’, thus pointedly distinguishing themselves from the ‘general (i.e. male) art magazines like *Art Monthly* or *Artscribe*.’ (Vol.2 No.6)

FAN was a predominantly black-and-white, text-based publication with densely-packed, collaged pages covered in hand-drawn decorations and scribbled notes alongside typewritten sections. Billing itself ‘an irregular periodical’, the magazine’s naïve, iconoclastic aesthetic distanced it from either the brash glossiness of UK *Cosmopolitan* (est. 1972) or cool minimal layouts of *Art Monthly* (est. 1976). The first volume of *FAN* addressed topics including Performance, Comics, Art History, and Photography, but it is notable that Education drew focus twice, in issues No.1 (1980) and No.10 (1984).⁵ [Figs.1 & 2] The inaugural editorial statement declares: ‘We chose the Art Education system as it relates to women for our first issue because we believe that it is a basically oppressive institution, instrumental in denying women equality.’ Like most art magazines the editorial remit encompassed news bulletins, articles, book and exhibition reviews, which were published alongside and with little distinction from more unusual creative writing and personal reflections. In this, *FAN*’s publishing tactics complemented the new personal content being expressed in women’s art, and participated in a field of activities designed to share and validate female knowledge and experience (Tobin, 2016). Moreover *FAN*’s emphasis on alternative gallery exhibitions and art’s contextual issues signalled a break from the formalist perspective that maintained the aesthetic, political and economic autonomy of art. This was also part of a more general transition in publishing as contemporary art grew in popularity. The editors of *FAN* provided the following summary of the publication’s roots:

FAN developed out of the Women Artist’s Newsletter, set up by an artists’ workshop at the National Women’s Liberation Conference in Birmingham in 1978. That newsletter was produced by different women’s groups in different parts of the country, and it ran until June 1979. Our aim was to provide a communications network, offering support, information, skills sharing, documentation of work, and also a forum for debate relevant to our practice as artists and women. Our intentions were active and we rejected dependence on the whimsy of mainstream history and criticism to represent or ignore us. But we were all practitioners of some sort and were determined to avoid the “sacrifice” of one women’s creative work to service that of others’. A publication was vital, public discourse, crucial, but production sharing, a necessity. (Vol.2 No.2: p.2)

This rich statement tells us much about the structure of the magazine and the motivations powering its production. Like many periodicals of the period, *FAN* had its origins in an educational conference, as: ‘during the late 1970s through to the mid-1980s, when the number of national feminist conferences in the UK was drastically reduced, periodicals became the most significant arena for internal feminist debate, and it was during these years that the

⁵ Issues no.1 – no.10 lack volume designation but constitute vol.1. More confusingly, some of the early issues are undated so, although it seems likely no.10 was published in early 1984, this is based on the author’s guesswork.

number of self-published feminist periodicals was at its height.’ (Tomlinson 2017: 433) *FAN* began life as an informal newsletter linking women’s groups across the country, before developing a sophisticated, flexible editorial structure to facilitate production of a more comprehensive magazine. The organisers formed a business collective to manage finances and distribution, while changing production collectives oversaw the content of individual themed issues. These instalments ‘rejected’ mainstream, market-driven aesthetic discourse, with *FAN*’s writers preferring an expansive, often personal approach that directed focus beyond the authoritative styles, venues and structures of the artworld. These decisions evidence Waters’ (2017: 449) claim that feminist periodicals were the consequence of ‘a “deeply felt need” for a media that would reflect the principles of women’s liberation not only between its covers, but also in its financing, production and editorial organization.’

It is notable that the editors framed *Feminist Arts News* as a ‘communications network’, and the periodical’s very title signalled its status as information exchange.⁶ In the pre-digital era, small-scale publishing was reliant on the affective exchanges conducted on its printed pages; a phenomenon theorists have convincingly framed as constituting a proto-social network that gestured towards future online communication practices (Jenkins 2006; Eichhorn, 2016). Rebecca Mead (2016: np), for instance, vividly recalls waiting in her provincial hometown each month for a *Spare Rib* subscription to arrive: ‘It was’, she reminisces, ‘a communication from another world.’ The pages of *FAN* provided a platform for diverse exchanges – calls for exhibition participation, letter writers seeking intellectual companionship or advice, urgent requests for fundraising assistance – and re-reading these pages is not dissimilar to eavesdropping on a conversation. According to Bill Reader and Kevin Moist (Kitch 2016: 18), this is not unusual: ‘In alternative media, social and creative aspects are emphasised as much as content related to the subculture in question; such publications encourage, even rely upon, engagement, participation, and interactivity with their audiences.’ Accordingly, a manifesto-style list of demands printed in no.1 includes the insistent message: ‘Communication is vital at this stage. KEEP WRITING IN FAN IS WRITTEN BY ITS SUBSCRIBERS’. These collaborative exchanges were not always smooth and editorials often include admissions of fatigue, frustration, or vague resentment among issue collectives. Each issue of the magazine comprised two editorial statements, from the business and production collectives, which read together stitch an account of exhausting and inspiring labour.

A pedagogical impulse suffused and animated *FAN*’s participatory network. The pages of the magazine are crowded with notices for slide packs, reading lists, exhibitions for hire, informational posters and cassette-taped conference talks, demonstrating a self-conscious drive towards knowledge-sharing and education (fig.3&4). An announcement in no.10 addressed ‘all women art students!’ and encouraged them to apply for university funds to invite feminist guest lecturers and speakers to their colleges. Thus, in conjunction with practical advice and skills-sharing, the distribution of knowledge about women artists past and present emerges as vital to the maintenance of an organised women’s art movement. While scouring these crowded

⁶ The editorial of volume 2 number 2, edited by Katy Deepwell on the subject of ‘Women Painting Today’, announced that the ‘News and Events’ section would be discontinued as it was an area better covered by the Women Artists Slide Library Newsletter.

pages the structural and emotive importance of this informal education network is palpable. The institutional pressures of tokenism and isolation are repeated refrains throughout both issues of *FAN*, as writers reflect on the impossibility for women on partial and temporary contracts to establish connections or revolutionise the system in which they are precariously employed. The repetition of these experiences, alongside the impulsion to share resources, serves to bind together female staff and students in the face of a hostile institution.

FAN No.1 features a riotous melange of hand-drawn decoration, hearts-and-crosses borders and cross-hatched patterns to break up the page, cartoons, type-written text hastily corrected in pen, handwritten segments, haphazard changes in font and letter size, cut-out shapes including speech bubbles, and a few photographic reproductions (of collaborative art project Fenix). This cut-and-paste aesthetic signals a shift in graphic design culture from the modernist grid format towards postmodernism's chaotic, exuberant style. Design historian Teal Triggs (2006: 3), following Stephen Duncombe, has described the unruly style of self-published fanzines as a 'graphic language of resistance to authority'. Although writing in reference to punk fanzines, her description aptly extends to *FAN*'s iconoclastic visual appearance (which, though certainly less abrasive, shares some characteristics with the later RiotGrrl zines). The magazine's anarchic style was matched by the subversive humour permeating its pages. A comic strip by cartoonist Fanny Tribble entitled 'Pain in the Arts' depicts a woman designer's dismissal by a boorish authority figure. The comic is droll despite its unpleasant subject and clearly seeks out an affective engagement from the viewer-reader based on shared experience of male colleague behaviour in art colleges. Like Tribble's cartoon, on the whole *FAN*'s published material is polemical stuff, unlikely to convert the uninitiated or unsympathetic. Its fiery tone is typified in Cate Elwes' declaration (emphasis added): 'The feminist student whose work is a direct expression of her political position, *stands as a direct challenge to the very fibre of the institution to which she belongs*'.

The first issue of *FAN* encompassed personal and theoretical statements, diary entries, statistics, and formally footnoted articles, on topics including mental health, primary education and activism. Vivid titles include 'Disillusionment', 'Beyond Protest', 'What Happens to Little Girls in the Classroom' and 'Poison Pie or Starvation'. The latest statistics revealed that, in March 1978, UK art colleges employed 1454 male art teachers to 221 female. This information is roughly circled in pen with a thick exclamation mark indicating outrage. Complementing this statistical evidence, writers offered prescient discussions on the subject of gender, casualization and university employment in the early stages of higher education's market-oriented reform. Contributions present a generally unified, left-leaning perspective on most issues; and, although arguments for revolution versus reform recur throughout the magazine, contributors generally agreed that the addition of women's art to existing syllabi wouldn't fundamentally alter the established structures of teaching, administration and assessment. There was, however, a belief in the revolutionary effect of greater numbers of women teachers upon art education that, from our current vantage point seems optimistic.⁷ However, the writing

⁷ For example, Cate Elwes wrote: 'It becomes obvious that until colleges employ a substantially larger number of women, our male oriented art education will remain unchanged.'

in *FAN* did not focus solely on the status of teachers and students; two powerful ‘commentary’ essays on the challenges of life-modelling and drawing, by Miriam Mackie and Mary Lynne Ellis, are particularly memorable for their unflinching scrutiny of the conditions surrounding that strange and historically knotty form of labour. Included in the second education issue (No. 10) the essays explore the effects of depersonalisation and objectification, and how that connects to the labour’s feminised status as underpaid and undervalued. ‘Why’, Mackie asks, ‘has our work been so consistently ignored?’ Examining women’s labour throughout the educational institutions, *FAN* challenged the historic class divisions between artist, assistant, model and cleaner, to urge solidarity among all women.

Offering an equal platform to history, theory and personal narrative, the magazine enacted a dissolution of intellectual hierarchies which paralleled the crumbling distinctions between art and craft being pursued by the women’s art movement. In fact, women’s craft was another topic addressed twice by *FAN* (Vol.1 No.4 and Vol.2 No.6), and there were further issues published on design. The relationship between art, craft and design was thoroughly dissected in both practice – for instance, the postal art project *Feministo* – and in writings by *FAN* contributors including Judy Attfield, Cheryl Buckley and Gillian Elinor.⁸ These new lines of intellectual enquiry were mirrored in the deliberately vernacular aesthetic of the magazine (although this was also, in all likelihood, a financial compulsion). The cover of the ‘Women’s Craft Issue’, for instance, features a pencil-drawn rendering of knitting needles, two contrasting balls of wool, and the beginnings of a scarf; its stitched motif of women holding hands clearly signalling a message of female solidarity. The cover for issue No.10 is equally inventive in representing the volume of women’s voices emanating from the educational institutions [Fig.2]. A roughly hewn cupola and blockier, low-slung building suggest both red-brick and polytechnic universities, with collaged layers of indecipherable text lying heavily across the bottom half of the page but rising into intelligible trails that drift away into the empty skies: ‘female aesthetics’, ‘women’s space’, ‘sexual harassment’, ‘art history’. The densely layered text suggests a cacophony of unheard voices that are beginning to find expression through educational conferences and platforms such as *FAN*.

Page design and illustration was often cleverly organised to visually reflect the theme of individual essays. Pen Dalton’s incisive contribution, ‘What is Art Education For?’, looked beyond art education’s technical instruction to examine its ideological effects upon gender and work expectations in later life. ‘Gender-specific focus within art at the Primary and Secondary stage is significant in this ordering system... By the time a girl leaves school she does not have to be forced unwillingly into traditional, feminine, low paid and less prestigious work, but continues to define herself as feminine in the occupational choices she makes.’ Dalton’s words are accompanied by an unattributed drawing depicting ‘The Art of Sewing’ book-cover, featuring an elegant font, stitched border, and fluffy bunny rabbit (fig.5). A strip of *bias binding* fabric cuts across the corner, the repeated words assuming alternate loaded meanings (of prejudice and restriction) in the context of schools’ restrictive education policies.

⁸ Although not the focus of this article, *FAN*’s contribution to rethinking the relative status of art, design and craft was invaluable. For more information see Jefferies 2016.

A double-page spread further along is idiosyncratically bordered by a handwritten editorial informing readers that, [t]his issue of FAN was produced and written by South London Art Group and friends...’ The trail of words encircles images of historical women artists, arranged and named to suggest a grand hall of portraits – a prestige usually reserved for the great men of history. (Fig.6) Yet this display is organised informally, almost jauntily, with scribbled notices similar to a pin-board or student yearbook. The words ‘Old Mistresses’ are presented in an oversized quasi-medieval font, which reinforces the sense of grandeur, while the awkward implication of the phrase undercuts it.⁹ The ‘gallery’ spread is a celebratory acknowledgment of women’s art historical predecessors, however the bathos continues in the trail of words encircling those images. The editorial connects art production, paid employment, motherhood, writing and research, indicating both continuity and progress in the status of women’s cultural production. The message ends on an intimate note to the reader by disclosing: ‘Altogether we have 17 children and during the course of magazine production we also welcomed 2 new babies... Sorry FAN is a little late!’.

Many of the themes addressed in FAN No.1 were sustained in No.10, ‘Women and Art Education 2’, including: isolation, ghettoization, belittlement of personal content in art, gender bias in assessment and career progression. The majority of contributions are anecdotal and experiential, precipitated by the reward of sharing and connecting individual experiences. The *repetition* of these themes - that is, similar accounts surfacing across the pages of both 1980 and 1984 editions – underscores the *structural* nature of these ostensibly individual inequities. However, the second issue on this subject included an expanded events listings and added important elements to the overall picture including a sexual harassment questionnaire. The magazine also looked significantly different, with a standardised grid layout and vertical text columns, bold sans serif headers, and streamlined black borders dividing the pages and providing visual continuity throughout.¹⁰ The text was now professionally typeset, although *FAN* still included some handwritten and hand-corrected sections. The issue included cartoon illustrations but also more photographic reproductions of artworks and, significantly, advertisements were now included, chiefly for exhibitions and resources such as the ‘Rentasnap Photo Library’.

FAN No.10 was more professional in appearance, as well as angrier or more frustrated in tone. The issue was put together by a collective of woman art students which formed following the Woman and Art Education Conference at Battersea Art Centre in November 1982. According to FAN’s business collective, this represented ‘the biggest change’ in arts education: ‘That is, the increased organisation of women art students nationally and the pressure they are bringing to bear, within the art schools, for change.’ The issue is a testament to the strength and importance of self-organisation and self-education, as well as the failure of the established art educational institutions to provide the kind of knowledge and skills desired by feminist artists. The student collective state: ‘We have begun challenging the system, not

⁹ *Old Mistresses* was the title of a 1974 exhibition in Baltimore, and a 1981 book by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock. The phrase neatly demonstrates the extent to which gender is encoded in culture (language), as the art historical term ‘Old Master’ has no female equivalent.

¹⁰ These changes were introduced from No.7 ‘Women’s Space’ (1982).

only by calling for change but also by creating alternatives, examining new ways of working, setting up our own seminar groups and organising exhibitions of students' work.'

The creation of alternatives was important, offering solutions to institutional sexism as well as diagnosing the problems. Issue No.1 fittingly titled its information page 'Alternatives?&!!?&?!?!&'. These 'alternatives' included extensive reading lists of available books and magazines, a 'Women Artists of the Renaissance' slide kit and study pack advertised (No.10), and a lecture series on 'The Contemporary Woman Artist' taught by Monica Ross, Su Richardson and Kate Walker (No.1). This educational information strongly implies the existence of feminist study groups who were searching out further information and teachers who could take these intellectual weapons back to the classroom. As Dinah Dosser writes in No.10, independently organised study groups are vital in the art college as they 'function not only as pressure and support groups but also as an effective alternative educational sector within the college.' Again and again the message is clear: women artists would have to take responsibility for their own education if they are to avoid isolating pressures and forge new ways of making art politically as feminists.

FAN No.1 included a loose-leaf poster insert soliciting contributions for the second issue on women's performance: 'Please: pin this notice in a prominent spot in your college, studio, office, workshop, staff room, evening institute...crèche? (and don't forget to tell your mum! Art has no age.)' (Fig.7) Not only does this gesture indicate unexpected commercial savvy, especially considered together with the 'Badges and T-shirts Offer' ('I'm a fan of *FAN*'), but the stylish, informative poster embodies the model of art education propagated by the periodical. It is a creative expression untied to any official institution or site, a creative expression that traverses workplaces, educational spaces, care centres, and encompasses women of all ages. An alternative form of knowledge production and distribution. It suggests the existence of a public viewer-readership for whom these magazines may have arrived as if communication from another world.

Conclusion

This article has traced the significance of informal study groups and independent publishing for women artists and historians forging new lines of enquiry in the arts during the 1970s and '80s. While the effect of document-duplication technologies and countercultural publishing upon the development of new social movements has been fairly well traced, it is hoped that this contribution will go some way to suggesting the importance of grassroots publishers and autodidactic readers for the circulation of new ideas about art-making, teaching, and criticism during a period in which feminist perspectives revolutionised the discipline of art history. The close examination of two issues of *FAN* explored how women organised collectively to scrutinise and challenge the traditions of a sexist educational institution, and to share information and resources in support of feminist art education.

Non-commercial feminist periodicals provided an autonomous discursive space outside of mainstream academic, or leftist political publishing to test new models of historical research, publicise events, share artworks, make personal connections and disseminate educational materials for others to teach and distribute. But who was reading *FAN*? Without circulation

figures and subscription details it is hard to say for certain, however, it seems certain that the magazine's distribution network grew over time. In Vol. 2 No. 1 the editors announced that a new distributor, Arts Ex-Press, had 'increased our visibility "on the market"'. You should now find FAN on the shelves of your local alternative bookshop, art centre, gallery, college library etc.' Presumably the magazine's editorial collective and contributing writers formed a core network of readers which would have included Pollock, Deborah Cherry, Jane Beckett, Lubaina Himid, Maud Sulter, Erica Matlow, Elwes, Elinor, and numerous others. Given the prominence that many of these women had in the establishment of the UK feminist art movement, a sturdy case could be made for *FAN*'s substantive contribution to that emergent field of knowledge. *FAN* was a key site for sharing information and for circulating new ideas and theories about women's art.

There is certainly further work to be done on evaluating this periodical and its place within a broader publishing milieu of the period. Although this article foregrounds self-education through the act of reading, there is much more to be understood about other aspects including the intersections of race, class and sexuality upon the pages of *FAN*. The magazine went on to publish critical and affirmative writing on a range of issues in women's art and design, including a celebrated issue on Blackwomen's Art edited by Lubaina Himid and Maud Sulter (vol. 2 no. 8, 1988) that 'would go out into the world as a passionate letter', intended to counter 'the continuing onslaught which marginalises and trivialises our experiences'.¹¹ It is notable that the two education issues of the magazine contained no direct references to, or discussions of, the racial dimension of art education in the UK. However, over time, the editorial collective routinely addressed its readers, encouraging all to become involved so that the magazine might 'address the critical absences – the dearth of critical writing, of engagement with class and race, of aesthetic re-evaluations' (vol. 2 no.2, 1985). There is work to be done charting these theoretical and activist developments and, fortunately, magazines provide an abundant source of historical documentation to draw upon. A notice published in News and Events of FAN No.10 perceptively announced: 'Although the exhibitions may be out of date, the women continue to work. We want to make a record of their work so that it is no longer made invisible by exclusion or silence. Please keep us informed of women artists working in your area.' Movement-led magazines exist as archives of historically transformative moments and *FAN* provides a mediated account of the women's art, history and theory movement as it unfolded in 1980s Britain. Given the challenges faced in today's exceptionally economised university environment – in which students have been reconfigured as consumers and staff as service-providers, and where knowledge is seemingly valued only for the extent to which it contributes to an individual's employability – the rich accounts of this earlier moment, in terms of collectively self-directed, politically powerful and transformative feminist education, offer lessons to us all.

¹¹ Catherine Grant's article, in this special issue, explores Himid and Sulter's editorial in greater detail. See also Anim-Addo 2014.

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